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ABSTRACT

The rationale for using critical autobiography projects in English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) instruction is discussed, and procedures for implementation are outlined. Writing a critical autobiography involves the student's presenting a personal narrative while exploring external factors influencing his life. Critical experiences in life provide fertile starting points to motivate students to read, write, and learn, and helps language learners understand that problems associated with living in a new culture are the result of social factors rather than personal shortcomings. Four case studies illustrate how critical autobiographies can be used in different settings and the effects they can have on students, their parents, and teachers. The cases include: a reading teacher working individually with a first- grader; a bilingual fifth-grader working with the whole class, assisted by ESL and computer teachers; a sixth-grade bilingual teacher using critical autobiographies in Spanish language arts and social studies classes; and a high school ESL teacher working with a small group of students. Topics discussed include: literacy development through critical autobiographies; situational factors affecting bilingual learners; classroom techniques; and project outcomes. Contains 15 references. (MSE)

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The Transforming Power of Critical Autobiographies[1]

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I don't do much wrong in Korea, because I'm a Korean person I keep doing wrong things here (Joseph, first grade student).

Bilingual and immigrant students often blame themselves, their language, and their culture for what happens to them. Critical autobiographies turn problematic circumstances into opportunities for learning. Students' cultural experiences provide a fertile starting point to motivate students to read, write, and learn (Moll & González, 1994). Critical autobiographies is the process of writing personal narratives while exploring external factors influencing the lives of these students. This process helps bilingual students understand that "the problems of living in a new culture are... the result of social factors rather than of personal shortcomings" (Benesch, 1993, p. 249). Students develop literacy through a better understanding of their own lives and extensive reading, writing, discussion, and research activities (Brisk & Zandman, 1995; Brisk, forthcoming).

The purpose of this paper is to explain the rationale for critical autobiography projects and to present procedures for implementation. Four cases illustrate how it was used in different settings and the effects critical autobiographies had on students, their parents, and teachers. These cases include: a Reading Recovery teacher working individually with a first grader, a bilingual 5th grade teacher working with her whole class and assisted by the English as a Second Language (ESL) and computer teachers, a 6th grade bilingual teacher using critical autobiographies in the Spanish language arts and social studies classes, and a high school ESL teacher working with a small group of students.

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Literacy Development Through Critical Autobiographies

Critical autobiography projects facilitate literacy development because students make ample use of language, they practice academic skills, they tap into their cultural experience, and they explore objectively and critically their world. Discussions around issues, reading for information, and writing and revising long texts develop students' ability to read, write, and think critically. "Like oral language, written language is acquired through actual use" (Edelsky, 1991, p. 49).

The nature of research projects, reading, writing, and discussions in the style of instructional conversations (Goldenberg, 1991), carried out in critical autobiography projects provide ample practice of academic language. To succeed in school bilingual students need to develop the difficult academic language used in content subjects. Language needed during classroom instruction is demanding and decontextualized (Wong Fillmore, 1982). Meaning is not evident from the context as in the playground where gestures and actions facilitate comprehension.

Freire (Freire & Macedo, 1987) believes that "[r]eading does not consist merely of decoding the written word or language; rather, it is preceded by and intertwined with knowledge of the world" (p. 29). Personal narratives are a powerful tool for students to explore and understand their surroundings as well as deal with their many problems and dilemmas (McGinley & Kamberelis, 1996; Igoa, 1995). Critical autobiographies respond to this broader view of literacy which reads "the word and the world"(Freire & Macedo, 1987, title) and in particular the world of bilingual individuals.

Situational Factors Affecting Bilingual Learners

Critical autobiographies transcend discussions of students' immediate life experiences. The world of bilingual students is affected by linguistic, cultural, economic, political, and social factors (Brisk, 1998). Students writing critical autobiographies explore objectively these situational factors. Linguistic factors include the nature of languages and use of each language. Language characteristics and use

help promote some languages and not others. For example, world and standardized languages hold a more prominent place in society; the type of writing system raises questions as to the feasibility of teaching students certain languages. Culture of the society at large determines the content of school curricula, assumptions on students' background knowledge, ways of communicating, disciplining, and behaving. Economic and political factors, in the form of language policies, immigration policies, and opportunities for social and economic mobility play a major role in the lives of bilingual learners and their families. The status of languages (or dialects) and their speakers, socio-economic level, race, gender, and reasons for being in the United States shape the attitudes and expectations of teachers toward bilingual students. Such factors also affect the attitudes of students and their families toward their home language and English.

The purpose of exploring these situational factors is to help students understand that what is happening to them is related to time and place and not inherent to their specific language, culture, or ethnic group. Students do not have control of these factors but can control their own reaction. Objective analysis of these factors helps students react in a constructive way to their present circumstances. For example, Galina, a second grade Russian immigrant via Israel refused to speak Russian to her mother, or Hebrew to the bilingual teacher. An analysis of the three countries where she had lived and the language used in each helped her understand her complex linguistic and cultural development. Reflection on multilingual people in her environment helped her realize that functioning in more than one language is possible and advantageous (Brisk & Zandman, 1995).

Procedure for Implementation

Critical autobiographies have a common structure of practicing the use of oral and written language in extended and thoughtful discourse around situational factors. The specific activities and topics are driven by the classroom context and the particular

concerns of the students participating. The general steps for carrying out a critical autobiography project include introducing the concept, exploring the themes through various activities, and writing, and assembling a book (see Figure 1). The exploration of themes and the writing usually go along simultaneously. Teachers adapt the activities to the age/grade level of the students and to their curricular requirements. These activities can be done in the native language, in English, or in both depending on the context. The themes explored should be those related to the experience of being bilingual and having to deal with different cultural environments. These activities take a scholarly perspective of inquiry appropriate for the classroom rather than a psychological perspective of healing appropriate for a counselor or psychologist's office.

Insert Figure 1 here

Implementation of Critical Autobiography Projects

The implementation varied depending on age of the students, language skills of students and teachers, number of students involved, and curriculum context where the project was carried out. Younger students drew pictures as they talked about the issues while older students discussed, responded to readings, carried out research projects, and interviewed expert adults previous to writing essays or reports. Some teachers worked individually with a student who seemed to have a particularly hard time academically and/or socially in school while other teachers carried out the project with a group of same language speakers or with their entire class. Bilingual teachers working with newcomers used the native language of the students while more fluent bilinguals chose the language. Teachers who did not know the native language of the students used English. Some teachers embedded the critical autobiographies to their reading and language arts curriculum, others also included social studies.

Joseph's Reading Recovery teacher, Ruth, used critical autobiographies in her weekly meetings with him to improve his English reading skills. Ruth stimulated conversations around language, culture, politics, economics, and social issues aided by books, maps, coins, and pictures. Most of the themes were about Korea and the Korean language and culture often presented in contrast with the United States. Joseph drew pictures as the teacher wrote down what he said. Questions and discussion helped expand and clarify points. The mother participated in some sessions helping clarify confusing ideas. Together they read a typed draft making additions and modifications required by Joseph. Ruth bound into a book the final version together with Joseph's drawings.

Angela, the fifth grade bilingual teacher, embedded critical autobiographies to her literacy and social studies curriculum. Students read biographies and autobiographies, historically relevant to the social studies theme of the month. They read and responded to stories that stimulated students' discussion on the situational factors relevant to bilingual students such as Grandmother's Journey, My Two Worlds, I Hate English, Family Pictures: Cuadros de Familia, and many more. After careful preparation, students interviewed a parent about her immigration experience and adjustment to the United States. All along they wrote chapters for their book using a process approach to writing. Students carried out these activities in the language of greater fluency and preference. The ESL teacher helped with students working in English and the computer teacher assisted with internet and CD ROM research as well as production of books using the computer. The students put together a class quilt. Each contributed with one square that represented a meaningful event in their lives.

Carmen, a social studies and language arts teacher, worked with a class of sixth grade Spanish-speaking newcomers. Students settled on ten topics for their book. These were listed permanently on the board. Each week Carmen started the exploration of the topic with a variety of activities such as reading and analyzing a

poem, interviewing a guest speaker, having students draw images of the issues, and others. Discussions ensued. For example, after the guest speaker left students compared their situation with that of the speaker. Prompted by questions from the teacher the students gave contrasting opinions. Christian pointed out that since they had arrived younger they had more time to learn English, presumably making things easier for them. Another student found the speaker's experience similar to her own : "lo mio se parece a lo de ella porque tambien en la primera escuela hubo problemas" (My case is similar to hers because in the first school there were problems). Others found hope for their future. They felt they had a chance to be as successful as she was. The students rounded up each topic writing an essay following the steps of the process approach to writing.

Angelique, an ESL high school teacher, worked with a group of beginners of a variety of language and cultural backgrounds. Initial discussions on their lives and hardships brought to light that the students felt ostracized by the English speaking students in the school. Angelique had her students carry out a research project on attitudes toward immigrants. They had never done a research project. In order to practice writing skills, Angelique had them write her a letter explaining their concerns, later they wrote an essay and finally they went on to do their research. With Angelique's help they read about the history of their group's immigration and about attitudes in general. With this information they wrote a simple paper. Later, they developed a questionnaire to be administered, with the help of the classroom teacher, to the English speaking students with whom they shared one class. Answers to questions such as "Have you ever traveled abroad?," "Do you speak a second language?," and "Do you have any foreign friends?" revealed that their classmates had never before had experiences with immigrants, other languages, and cultures. The students incorporated these results to their final research paper.

Effects on Students, Parents, and Teachers

Students practiced and developed important literacy skills such as reading books critically, relating various readings, writing extended discourse, and discussing themes in depth. They learned how to do library research, how to carry out interviews, questionnaires, surveys, and how to synthesize the information. Students learned about each other's life experiences. Parents discovered many undisclosed feelings among their children and learned about the needs of bilingual learners. Teachers, even veteran bilingual teachers, learned a great deal about their students' language and literacy abilities as well as life concerns. All teachers raised their expectations with respect to their students' language and literacy skills. Many improved their literacy practices (Coppola, 1997).

Joseph had shown no progress in his Reading Recovery program from September through January. By mid-March, eight weeks into his critical autobiography project he tested out of Reading Recovery. His mother, and later his father, started to frequent the school to discuss Joseph's education. They voiced their concerns and questions with respect to language policy at home. Ruth, the Reading Recovery teacher, who was taking a course on bilingualism, was able to answer inquiries with respect to the value of developing native language literacy, encouraging positive attitudes toward both languages, and serving as models of the language they knew best. Ruth incorporated some of the culturally relevant material into her Reading Recovery lessons. Both Ruth and the classroom teacher gained a new respect for Joseph's capabilities when they learned that he could speak, read, and write Korean.

Angela's students learned how to analyze and compare the content of books and greatly improved their writing skills. They also gained respect for themselves, their families, and the other students. This class consisted of students of Puerto Rican background mostly raised in the United States and immigrants from Central America. The immigrant students' for the first time shared many of their concerns such as the

lowering of economic status: "En Guatemala mi mama era maestra. Aqui ella tiene trabajo haciendo limpiezas" (In Guatemala my mother was a teacher. Here she works cleaning); the first experience in an American school: "I felt sad because there are different kids talking to me in English. I didn't understand them;" and being left behind: "When my mother left I felt sad. I thought that she left us because she didn't like us." They told about their war experiences: "They [soldiers] were about five men and she had to cook for them or they would kill her. My mom stayed awake all night because the soldiers stayed there. She was afraid they were going to rape her." These students realized that others had similar concerns and at the same time gained respect for themselves for their endurance. Their Puerto Rican classmates and the teacher saw these immigrant children in a different light. Their trials and tribulations engendered admiration and respect. Angela's Central American parents learned of their children's bitterness of having been left behind while the parents were settling in the United States. Discussions with the parents helped clarify their parent's own anguish on leaving them temporarily behind. "No saben lo duro que fue para mi dejar a mis hijos..." (You have no idea how hard it was for me to leave my children behind) declared one mother.

Carmen's students learned to analyze and support opinions which initially were stated as truths based mostly on hearsay. When one of the students declared that "Todos los morenos son drogadictos" (All African Americans are drug addicts), Carmen asked: "Cuantos Latinos conocen que venden drogas?" (How many Latinos you know sell drugs?). A few hands went up. The same happened when she asked: "Cuántos morenos honestos y trabajadores conocen?" (How many honest and hard working African Americans they know?). Soon the class concluded that these generalizations along racial lines are untrue and unfair.

This project had a strong effect on changing Carmen's literacy practices from worksheets to extended discussions and writing. She also learned a lot about her

students. For example, Carmen found out that in spite of being newcomers her students used a considerable amount of English in their daily lives. This finding was the result of a personal survey on language use the students carried out as a class project. Carmen had believed these students knew no English.

Angelique's students gained proficiency and confidence in their writing skills, producing increasingly more complex and lengthier writings. They also stopped blaming themselves for not fitting in school. They realized that their classmates limited experiences with people of other cultures made them feel awkward in their interactions. Rather than feeling sorry for themselves, they felt sorry for the provincialism of their classmates experiences.

Conclusion

Critical autobiographies motivate students and informs teachers and parents. Students react positively to a school environment that considers issues affecting their lives serious matters worthy of discussion and analysis. Unraveling factors affecting bilinguals provides a fertile ground for engaging students in productive literacy activities. Students need to discuss issues, read quality literature, and write extensively and carefully. Through understanding of the world around them, students take control of their present life situation. Literacy and school work in general improves from the gained perspective of themselves in their new environment. Students reveal themselves fully, not only as strugglers in a new culture and with varying degrees of ability in their second language, but as bilingual bicultural individuals with complex -- and often harsh -- histories. Parents and teachers gain a deeper knowledge of the students' concerns, feelings, and thoughts. Teachers develop a reassurance of the extent of their students' ability and potential through their performance in all these complex tasks.

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Figure 1: Guidelines for Implementation

1. Introduction of the Project

To younger students (K-2) explain that they are going to write about their lives in different countries or about the culture of their parents. It will be a chapter book about themselves, their families and the countries where they have lived.

To older students (3-12) introduce the concept of a biography and autobiography. Have them read biographies and autobiographies. Discuss them. Do other activities to familiarize them with this genre.

2. Exploration of Themes

Explore external factors and issues of concern for the students through different activities. These activities can be an integral part of the curriculum of language arts, reading and content areas. Depending on the age/grade level of the students, use activities such as:

- Reading books about students' countries, stories about immigrant children, and other relevant topics that will stimulate thinking. The teacher can read them aloud or let the students read them in groups or individually.
- Writing response journals.
- Developing questionnaires to interview families, each other, other students or staff in the school.
- Bringing speakers (including family members) with immigrant experiences.
- Having open discussions about topics of concern in the style of instructional conversations.
- Creating surveys about topics of concern.
- Studying the socio-political history of ethnic groups.
- Comparing characteristics of the country of origin and the United States.

These activities are directed to elicit discussion and thinking around linguistic, cultural, economic, political, and social factors or aim at exploring objectively, and in depth, issues raised by the students. This exploration can be done during pre-writing activities as well as during writing and revising. Parents and other family members should be involved to clarify and contribute to the discussion and information sharing.

3. Writing the Autobiographies

Students use a process approach to writing. Younger students draw and dictate their stories. Type drafts and read them with the students for additions and revisions. Older students write drafts, revise and edit their work. They use computers when available. These activities are carried out simultaneously with the exploration of themes.

4. Publication of Books

Students produce chapter books or several books that contain all the work they have done.

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